



Green Fingers

Newsletter of the South Dublin Allotments Association

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Summer 2009

From the Chair

Our Committee is currently busy preparing for our third Annual Allotments Open Day which will be held this year at the Friarstown allotments site from 12-4pm on Saturday 25th July – all welcome. These open days have proved popular so far, both with the public, many of whom have never seen allotments operating, and other allotment holders who appear to have unlimited interest in seeing other people's plots!

For ourselves as an association, it is a great opportunity to show all that is best about allotment growing – the terrific crops people are growing, the highly individualistic plots and growing methods and the fun and fulfilment we get as allotment holders.

This year's open day will be a real treat for the senses - Friarstown this year is bursting with colour, growth has been phenomenal and the panoramic views make this a wonderful site.

This year we again have had

great cooperation from South Dublin County Council's Development and Parks Departments who can proudly and rightfully showcase the wonderful amenity that is Friarstown at the Open Day. Also, we have the support of An Taisce's Green Communities Scheme. This Scheme has supported us in our efforts to manage allotments sites, such as Friarstown, as places of natural habitat for wildlife.



We hope you can make it to the Open Day and join us with fellow allotmenters and other interested visitors for a good old chat about growing food. If your own plot is in Friarstown you may wish to show your plot to the groups which will be touring the site on the day.

(visitors will be asked not to enter the individual plots but to view them from the pathways).

Apart from this we had a further meeting with the Council's Development and Parks Department to explore issues of mutual interest concerning the allotments. One piece of bad news is that the Council is planning an increase in the lease fee and we have asked them to keep this at a minimum. We also hope that any increases will be used to improve on-site facilities and maybe towards the cost of setting up more plots in this cash-starved era we are entering. We have stressed to the Council that part of what has always made allotments attractive is their affordability and availability to people of whatever background.

Our AGM this year will be held on 14th September, more details to follow.

We would encourage you to consider joining the Committee as we need fresh ideas and the energy of new members. Also we are in need of volunteer members to help with our events – open days, information days etc. We also need the help of someone with I.T. skills to assist us in the development of our website.

Happy Growing!

By Michael Fox, Chairman

3rd Annual Open Day

South Dublin Allotments Association is holding its 3rd Annual Open Day at Friarstown Allotments on Saturday 25th July, 12-4pm. It will be launched by the Mayor of South Dublin County Council, Councillor Mick Duff, at 12.30pm. There will be

information stands, guided tours of the allotment plots, guest speakers, vegetable competition and more. Check out the website (www.southdublinallotmentsassociation.ie) for further details, competition information and so forth.

Allotment Updates

Tymon

Production is well under way in Tymon with some crops doing really well. The potato plants have a good number of tubers under them but I have some slug damage already. The red skinned variety, I think red Duke of York, seems free of holes.

Unfortunately it is necessary to protect, almost on an individual basis, some plantings with chicken wire from some gnawing creatures, rabbits or worse, and some ploholders have had a hard time, though others are luckier or have done a better job with the fencing. I have tried, in no particular order, chicken wire, plastic fencing, moth balls, a feather boa, a scarecrow of a baby, strong perfume (Dior) buzz tape, video tape, human hair from the hairdresser..... Courgettes seem to be pretty immune to depredations from anything once they get beyond the slug stage.

The unused plot by the wall, empty for two seasons now,

has had the enormous crop of dock cut away and it will be interesting to see if work will start as we know that there is great interest in it.

By Hester Scott

Friarstown

Friarstown allotments are progressing well this year. Almost all plots are fully cultivated, and some others have been transferred to new plot holders.

Things are gearing up for the Open Day at the end of the month so there's some tidying up going on. Despite all the rain and humid conditions, no sign of any potato blight yet, thanks in part, no doubt, to the breezy conditions up on the hills.

First crops of potatoes, onions, broad beans, peas and raspberries are being harvested by this author, who is new to Friarstown. The soil is definitely very good up here.

By Friarstown plot holder



A flower-friendly allotment in Friarstown

Corkagh

Things are looking good in Corkagh Park allotments. The harvesting of crops has started, mainly first early potatoes. Two under-used allotments have been reallocated. Welcome to Corkagh Allotments to our new neighbours.

A strimming Saturday was organised to cut back the weeds, long grass etc. around the site, but it rained all that day so it was a wash out. Plot holders are strimming on an individual basis now and the site is starting to look good.

Despite the good work South Dublin County Council did with rabbit-proof mesh being installed the rabbits are back with a vengeance.

By Clondalkin Gardener

New from around the Country

Dublin

Fingal County Council have revised the proposed sizes of plots at their forthcoming site at Powerstown. They are 50 m², 100 m², and 200 m², at a cost of €50, €100 and €200 respectively per year.

Allotments in Lusk

Private Allotments are planned for March 2009. They are within walking distance of Lusk and convenient to Malahide, Swords and

Balbriggan. There will be two sizes available, fenced against rabbits. Parking available and located on a bus route. For further information phone John: 087-9572181, Susan: 087-2637341.

Fingal Allotments

Large allotments in North County Dublin, available for less than €1 a day, i.e. €320 for 250 m². Also coming soon: Picnic/Barbeque area (for all the family). Farmers Market (where you will have the

opportunity to sell your produce). Phone: 087-2586933, Email: fingalallotments@gmail.com.

Tipperary

The first sod has been turned on Clonmel Sowers & Growers' new pilot allotment site in conjunction with Clonmel Borough Council. www.clonmelallotments.org. Email: ewiz@earthlink.net, mieke@eircom.net. Tel: 052-27930, john@clonmelallotments.org

Increasing yield naturally

An interesting article in the Sunday Times of 5th July last by Mark Keenan describes a vegetable grower who produces record-breaking giants.

John Evans has been growing champion vegetables for over 25 years and has eight Guinness world records to his name. These include a 45lb cabbage, a carrot of nearly 20lb, a 59lb courgette and a beetroot of nearly 43lb, none any less tasty for their size.

All this was not achieved in some sunny clime such as California, but in the tough wilderness that is Alaska. Nor



did John use large quantities of artificial fertilizer developed by vast biochemical corporations but developed his own natural special brew using real science in harmony with nature.

John was born in Dungarvan and conducted his research on a farm in Alaska. He took a degree in microbiology, learning how microbes work within the soil to release nutrients to plants.

John saw that increasing beneficial microbes increases nutrient uptake by plants, enhancing their growth and improving the nutrient levels in plants themselves. He observes that shop-bought food has 75% fewer nutrients because commercial fertilizers do not contain enough microbes and minerals. He also declares that *'They have killed the soil by overloading it with nitrogens.'*

John went on to produce his special brew as a compost tea called Bountea, more details of which can be found on www.bountea.com. He has proven that understanding and working with soil can achieve fantastic results in increased crop yields. Mainstream scientists are only just getting to grips with this methodology. This begs the question: why are millions upon billions of dollars/euros etc. being spent

on extremely complex and artificial ways of increasing yields when there are simpler and more natural methods available?

By his long time trials John has show that his method does not deplete soils over time. He is even involved in crop trials in the Philippines, where rice plants are now producing 26 stems instead of six. Over 7,000 farmers have now signed up for this programme, its success having spread rapidly by word of mouth.

Why are scientists so obsessed with genetically modified solutions and twisting nature into unnatural forms when the solution to increased yield and potentially world hunger is right under their feet in the soil? Maybe the biotech companies just don't see big enough profits in compost tea.

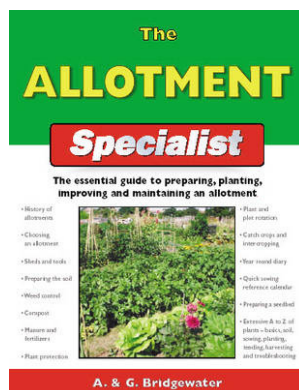
John Evans has returned to Ireland and is successfully testing out his methods on the soil of West Cork.

By Sinéad Ní Bháin

Book review

Allotment Specialist by Alan Bridgewater

"The Allotment Specialist" is crammed with practical information on every aspect of growing produce on an allotment. Beginning with the basics, it includes tips on choosing a plot, preparing the soil, crop rotation, planting the beds, and weed and pest control. Year-round calendars provide at-a-glance information on key tasks and give pointers on keeping



allotments productive all year round. Comprehensive, A-Z directories of vegetables and fruits guide readers through

the most popular varieties, their soil and site needs, and the best times and methods for sowing, planting and harvesting. With reliable, practical information and an easy-to-use format with clear illustrations and diagrams throughout, this is the perfect companion for beginner or experienced allotment owner.

Available from Easons at €6.55. Published by New Holland Publishers Ltd, ISBN: 1845374827/9781845374822

The honey and the allotment holder

Although the craft of bee keeping is not as popular as in times past, allotment holders in Friarstown have become accustomed to the hives located inside the main gate. They may even occasionally catch sight of the bee keeper dressed in his white bee suit and smoke bellowing from his smoker as he manipulates his colonies. As an allotment holder in Friarstown and a bee keeper I often envy this bee keeper with his hives located in close proximity to an allotment site and the biodiversity it provides.

Most bee keepers benefit from what is termed a spring flow whereby the foraging bees collect nectar and pollen from the spring flowering trees and shrubs such as chestnut, whitethorn and catkin. This is followed by the June lull when things slow down and only pick up again when the Summer wild flowers and blackberry begin to bloom. For those bee keepers living close to the mountains they can also benefit from the flowering heather in Autumn. For the foraging bees whose hives are sited close to an allotment site

they benefit from year round foraging provided by the allotment holder. Soft fruit blooming in May and June followed by the wild flowers and flowering weeds provide a valuable resource for bees. Even those brassicas, beet and onions which bolt and go to seed are a welcome site for both the honey bee and benefit the bee keeper.



Unfortunately honey bee numbers are decreasing at an alarming rate. This is caused by climate change, environmental pressure, use of pesticides and changing farming methods. At present, colonies are being lost to the infestation of the vireo mite which was introduced to Ireland about ten years ago and Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD). This is a new and more worrying phenomenon,

which some scientists claim has been caused by using pesticides formulated by a concoction of chemicals used to overcome plant disease which have become resistant to existing pesticides. It has been claimed that the honey bee will become extinct within the next 20 years. As 90% of plants are pollinated by bees this will have a devastating effect on food production. It has been suggested that the multibillion almond crop in the USA will completely collapse within the next 10 years if bees are wiped out.

In conclusion, the next time you are tempted to swat that honey bee which buzzes around you when working on your allotment site, allow her to go on her way. She means you no harm as all she wants to do is pollinate your peas, beans and soft fruit. The honey bee can easily be identified as a dark or brown bee and is distinct from the wasp which is black and amber or the bumble bee which is much bigger and can vary in colour depending on the species.

By Joe Brooks

What to be doing now

Sow now: Dwarf French beans, spring cabbage, spring onions, salad crops, radish, parsley, peas, calabrese, kohlrabi, turnip, Swiss chard, oriental greens.

Plant out now: sprouting broccoli, winter and spring cauliflower, kale, leeks and winter cabbage.

Other tasks: Watch out for cabbage white butterflies - check for and destroy eggs on the underside of cabbage

leaves and put netting over all plants. Pick French beans regularly to stop them getting tough and encourage more cropping.

Check potatoes regularly for any signs of blight (soft, light brown patches). Spray as directed by your chosen fungicide, e.g. copper sulphate. If plants are affected, cut the haulms (stems) down to the ground to prevent the disease going into

the potatoes. They can be dug up and eaten about three weeks later.

Pick raspberries and other soft fruit in dry conditions - they'll be less mushy. Once raspberries have finished fruiting cut out the old canes - these are darker and woodier-looking than the new canes. Cut away any suckers travelling out from the plants.

Enjoy the fruits of your labour over the next few months!

Urban farmer

I became interested in owning chickens after seeing them a lot in the Irish media, especially on TV. (Blame Richard Corrigan!)

I was visiting relatives down in Westmeath where I saw coops on two farms with half a dozen chickens each, for domestic use. On one of the farms I saw a young primary school child looking after them, enjoying his birds and feeling that he has a special role within the family. His father moves the hen coop to new grass every day as it was too big for him to move and his mother would order more supplies of meal.

I came back to the big smoke and began looking at getting started at producing my own eggs. I was able to start up with three chickens and meal for less than €100, compared to prices of between €200-400.

You can make a coop to the size you want, preferably on wheels for ease of moving, or get someone handy to make one for you.

I was thinking of using the thumb of rule of one chicken per person. However, as I live on my own I thought to get two anyway to keep each other company. Then I decided to get three in case one died.

There are foxes and other animals in the area that would try to go for the birds but none

has gone for them so far.

Is training needed to look after hens? I don't think it is, not for a small number of birds. People mostly don't go on courses for looking after pets and keeping hens would be similar to keeping pet cage birds.

On a daily basis, between my canaries and the three hens, within twenty to thirty minutes I have them looked after. When I come back from work I check the two cages and in the coop I usually have a present of eggs. In the morning I move the coop and run to where they were the day before last and change the water and feed. I give them about a cup of meal per bird and scraps from the kitchen. My hens seem to like to feed on their own.

The rotation does lead to bad scarring of the lawn but it relatively quickly comes back to what it was before and better. I regularly wash out where the hens sleep in their coop but not where they leave their eggs. I use old newspapers for their nesting area, though others commonly use straw.

Is the cost and hard work worth it? The initial purchase of the coop etc. is the biggest expense, but no doubt help could be got from a credit union for this. Some work in researching poultry care and



'Bwaaaaaark, buck, buck, buck!'
Happy hens in their suburban home.

preparation needs to be done beforehand. The hens do need to be looked after every day, but a friend could be roped in to help, especially if away on holidays. He/she can be rewarded with eggs to take home. Likewise, any doubters as to the worthiness of this new occupation can soon be persuaded with the gift of a half dozen eggs!

By Max Berber

On the Web

www.allotments.ie - this site provides information about mainly private allotments all over the country, county by county, as well as useful articles, blogs and other information.



Funding

An Taisce are running a grant scheme for community groups which have projects incorporating biodiversity. This is called 'Green Communities'.

For further details phone An Taisce Education Unit on 01-4002202.

Allotments; Venetian-style

I saw some very interesting allotments during a visit to France in late May.

These unique plots are referred to as “Les Hortillonages” and are situated right in the middle of the city centre, in Amiens, in the Picardy region of Northern France.

The River Somme flows through the city and many centuries ago dams were built, and flat land either side of the river was developed in a “Venice-like” way with canals. A large area, about the size of the Phoenix Park, has been used since to grow produce for the city’s inhabitants. The plots can only be accessed by small punt boats.



What is unique about them, (apart from their location, only a stone’s throw from France’s largest cathedral) is their fertility (up to three crops per year can be grown in the ground). Also I was fascinated by how long they have survived in constant use. They are now enjoyed as a tourist amenity with canal tours for 60,000 visitors every Summer (organised by the Society for the Protection of Les Hortillonages)

Were it not for the work of this association Les Hortillonages would have been destroyed by the building of a motorway 30 years ago.

Nobody knows for sure how long these plots have been used as allotments. There are references to them in works of art in Amiens Cathedral dating back to middle ages, but they probably date back 2,000 years when France was part of Gaul and the Roman soldiers who occupied the region created dams and this



vast web of intricate canals (called “rieux”) which divide the 1500 plots from each other.

Plotolders have for years maintained the soil’s fertility by scooping the nutritious silt with a special tool from the canal beds surrounding their plots, leaving the sods to dry out over about a year then carrying them to the plots where they break up like a shortcake biscuit when you let them drop.

The site is a real beauty spot and there are also some really lovely allotments in a nearby park (Parc St. Pierre) which are worth a visit.

By Michael Fox

Forthcoming Events/Notices

A date for your diary

The Annual General Meeting of the South Dublin Allotments Association will take place on **Monday 14th September 2009**. A further notice will be sent out to all Association members nearer the time giving more details of venue, agenda etc.

Eden Allotments Family Fun Day

Carrickfergus Borough Council are holding a Family Fun Day at Eden Allotment Gardens on Saturday 8th August 2009.

This is to celebrate National Allotments Week which takes place between 10th - 16th August.

The Family Fun Day is from 12 noon - 4pm and includes scarecrow competition, barbecue, food and craft stalls, children’s games, face-painting and more.

For further details see www.carrickfergus.org or www.edenallotments.co.uk or www.edenallotments.org.



Editor’s note to the wider membership

Following our last request for contributions to the newsletter, several members wrote articles. If you wish to contribute an article for the newsletter, new writers are always welcome. Feedback on the content is also welcome. E-mail us at sdaa@eircom.net.

Contact Details

The South Dublin Allotments Association can be contacted at sdaa@eircom.net or at www.southdublinallotmentsassociation.ie